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Framing Propaganda: Print Media Coverage of Irish Public Service Workers

Gerard Murphy

MA in Sociology (Applied Social Research)

Equality of access to the public sphere is considered by many as a prerequisite to the operation of a functional democracy. Equally important is the existence of a print media that promotes reports that are honest, accurate and comprehensive, and analysis that is informed, fair and based on the facts. This article summarises a longer piece of research that tests these important assumptions. Using a Framing Analysis approach this research critically examines the representation of public service workers in the Irish Independent. It finds that this representation is symbiotic and reflective of the dominant discourse of government, business and employer elites that seek to shift the burden created by the casino capitalism of the free market on to ordinary workers and the most vulnerable in society. In general this research suggests that the print media coverage of the Irish Independent is reflective of the editorial ethos at the Independent News and Media group which is aimed at maintaining the status quo rather than challenging it. This research suggests that the media representations circulated by the Independent News and Media Group are ideologically driven and that due to its status as the leading media company in Ireland this raises serious issues that strike at the heart of democracy and citizenship of the republic.

Introduction

If one needed proof that Ireland is now in the grip of economic recession, one only has to switch on to television news or pick up a daily newspaper to view the consequences of the global and national financial crisis. However, just as few people questioned the political, economic and financial policies that led to the crisis, likewise few people now critically analyse the manner in which the mass media is representing this 'economic downturn'. Perhaps many would

agree with the concept that the media should, in the form of a social contract provide “reports that are honest, accurate and comprehensive, and analysis that is informed, fair and based on the facts” (Kennedy 2010). In so doing the media should therefore act as a mirror of events in society and the world, “ensuring a faithful reflection” (McQuail 2005, p.83). However there are those who claim that the reflections of the mirror in society have become distorted and only reflect the agenda of the powerful. A recent analysis by Greg Philo of the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) titled *More News, Less Views* reflects on how the reporting of news had become the reporting of ‘someone’s’ opinion of the news. He comments that news is a procession of the powerful, characterised by the orthodoxy of views and the lack of critical voices. For instance “when the credit crunch hit, we were given a succession of bankers, stockbrokers and even hedge-fund managers to explain and say what should be done, but these were the people who had caused the problem” (Philo 2008).

In a similar analytical process to that promoted by Philo, this article summarises postgraduate research that investigated the media coverage of public service workers in Ireland as represented in Ireland’s leading daily newspaper, the Irish Independent. Using a Frame Analysis approach the research critically examined the representation of public service workers in the Irish Independent in the critical analytical period that preceded the government budget of December 2009. Findings documented here, show that this representation was symbiotic and reflective of the dominant discourse of government, business and employer elites that sought to shift the burden created by the casino capitalism of the free market on to ordinary workers and the most vulnerable in society. In general this research suggests that the print media coverage of the Irish Independent is reflective of the editorial ethos at Independent News and Media Group (INMG), an ethos that coincidentally concurs with the ideological preferences of the elites

in society which is aimed at maintaining the status quo. This research concluded that the media representations circulated by the INMG were ideologically driven and that due to its status as the leading media company in Ireland this raises serious issues that strike at the heart of democracy and citizenship of the Irish republic.

Background- Collapse and Crisis

The Irish economy has suffered as a result of the global recession, the economic success enjoyed during the boom Celtic Tiger years ended abruptly. Government policy of cutting personal, business and corporation taxes led to a twenty percent reduction in the tax base due to an over reliance on property transaction taxes (ICTU 2009, p.15) accruing from a booming housing market. This meant that when recession struck, it hurt countries such as Ireland, Iceland and Britain to a greater extent. To cope with the collapse in the public finances the government set up a review group, comprised mostly of economists, to identify where savings could be achieved in government expenditure, to compensate for the decline in taxation revenues.

The panel known as the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (aka An Bord Snip Nua), reported in June 2009 and recommended cuts in public expenditure including a reduction of the numbers employed in the public sector workforce by 17500. In addition in the Group's view, the government needed to secure further savings in public service pay costs to achieve the required reductions in overall public expenditure, and in this context "it would have to consider further reductions in rates of pay and allowances in addition to the numbers reductions proposed in this Report" (SGPSNEP 2009, p.6). In the following six months during the lead in to the government budget, coverage in the general media focussed extensively on the groups recommendations. However, early on in the general debate concerns

were expressed that one group, public sector workers, were receiving unfavourable representation in the media, particularly in the printed news media.

Among trade unionists there were concerns expressed about a right wing media crusade (O’Connor 2010) referring to what many public sector workers believed was an orchestrated media campaign to justify the need for cuts in public sector pay. Indeed prominent socialists claimed that public sector workers were being “framed for a crime they did not commit” (Higgins cited in Irish Independent 2009). One company in particular, the INMG, were to the forefront of claims by public sector workers of the existence of unfavourable media representation. Indeed concerns among public sector workers about the supposed negative representation even led to two public sector unions IMPACT and PSEU tabling motions at their annual delegate conferences that called for union members to cease their purchases of the group’s publications (IMPACT 2009, PSEU 2010).

In investigating these alleged misrepresentations the research examined print media representation of public sector workers by the flagship daily publication in Ireland of the INMG, the Irish Independent. Using a frame analysis approach (Reese 2001, Iyengar 1991, Entman 1993, Entman 2004), the research collated, examined and analysed articles from the Irish Independent over a specific time frame. The concept of framing has received a great deal of attention in diverse fields of study such as communication, political science, sociology, psychology, and linguistics in the recent past. In relation to the printed news, media frames are regularly used to package everyday realities, journalists limited by time and space use frames to convey sometimes complex issues in an instantly recognisable format. Thus, recent turmoil in the financial, banking, and property markets becomes known as the ‘credit crunch’, Irish government employment

agencies attempts to attract high value employment becomes known as the development of the 'smart economy' and the 'war on terror' frames the bulk of American foreign policy. In essence the use of frames can be seen as a useful, time-saving and 'common sense' approach in the work of journalists.

However frames can also be used to perpetuate the status quo and confirm as inevitable and natural the powerful positions of some in society, thus frame analysis allows us to see how the routine, taken-for-granted structures of everyday thinking contribute to a structure of dominance, explaining why Gramsci urged us to expand our notion of ideology to include the world of common sense (Gamson et al. 1992, p.381). The use of specific frames can slant a perspective in favour of a specific direction and a preferential outcome, some think it reasonable to suggest that when news clearly slants, those people favoured by the slant become more powerful, and freer to do what they want (Entman 2007, p.170). When the objective of a frame is to influence in a certain direction, there is evidence to suggest that it succeeds, as Entman (1993, p.56) proposes "if the text frame emphasizes in a variety of mutually reinforcing ways that the glass is half full, the evidence of social science suggests that relatively few in the audience will conclude it is half empty".

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Theoretically the research adopted a perspective known as the "propaganda model" of media operations by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988). The propaganda model postulates that elite media interlock with other institutional sectors in ownership, management and social circles, effectively circumscribing their ability to remain analytically detached from other dominant institutional sectors (Klaehn 2002, p.147). The influential forces that act to filter the news include:

- 1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms,
- 2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media,
- 3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power;
- 4) ‘flak’ as a means of disciplining the media; and
- 5) anti-communism as a national religion and control mechanism.

These elements interact with and reinforce one another (Chomsky and Herman 1988, p.2). In essence in an Irish context the “propaganda model” postulates that it is rather naïve to suggest that the Irish print news media that is controlled by the wealthy elite would ignore the views of their owners. This would be as McQuail (1995, p.12) argues comparable to saying that were the entire mass media controlled by trade unions, women’s groups or social workers, that this would have no impact on editorial content.

The research project is located in the paradigm that recognises that all news is a socially constructed version of reality, and that the nature of news and how it is processed and packaged is of fundamental importance. The use of media frames to condense complex issues into an easily recognisable and comprehensive format is a standard function across all media genres. The process of framing is therefore a critical activity in the construction of social reality because it helps shape the perspectives through which people see the world and frame analysis is acknowledged as a useful research tool that seeks to examine if framing conveys a *preferred* meaning of certain phenomena (Tracy 2004, p.454). While some frames may be manifest and recognisable, others are latent and embedded

with meaning, as Gitlin (1980, p.7) indicates frames may be largely unspoken and unacknowledged.

Framing therefore may involve processes that are both inclusive and exclusive, that focus on selection and salience of news attributes, but that may also only involve minute modifications, as Iyengar (1991) reminds us the concept of framing may refer to only subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of problems (1991, p.11). However frames also require attention at a macro/contextual level as Morley (1976, p.246) says its important to examine the “basic conceptual and ideological ‘framework’ through which events are presented and as a result of which they come to be given one dominant/primary meaning rather than another”. Frame analysis therefore on the basis of definition examines the processes of selection, salience, contextualization, subtleness, interpretation and remedies often embedded in media frames. While acknowledging the active agency of media audiences to accept or reject media texts, frame analysis assumes that influential possibilities are plausible and therefore contend that “communication is too often taken for granted when it should be taken to pieces” (Fiske NA cited in Hartley 1982, p.8).

Findings

The following section outlines the findings of the research, by documenting the main frames identified and by illustrating how these frames are used to portray public service workers. The research found that the representation of public sector workers by the Irish Independent was heavily slanted within an “anti-public sector worker” framework indicated by the episodic framing (Iyengar 1991) of public sector workers, that has the potential to alienate or ‘other’ (Haynes et al 2006) the said group of workers in the minds of the general public. These representations are anchored primarily on a main ‘Public versus Private’ frame which consistently argues supposed differences between public

and private sector workers in terms of pay and conditions of employment. Four further frames act as supportive interactive frames which portray an unpatriotic, privileged, inefficient, militant, self-serving public sector worker in contrast with a taxpaying, pension paying, efficient, long-suffering private sector worker.

The two-dimensional nature of the media representation is illustrated by the vilification of public sector workers that appeases and is supportive of a government policy that is intent on cutting public sector pay. These representations are also supportive of the general stated policy of business elites and articulated by employer groups such as IBEC and ISME that advocates cuts in public expenditure and reductions in general pay rates, which they see as a prerequisite to economic recovery. In this respect the media representation of public sector workers follows the “cascading model” (Entman 2003) as the frames are supportive of government policies and also reflect the opinions of powerful elites in Ireland. The absence or dismissal of a frame which might counter these dominant perspectives is also a feature of these representations.

Frame 1: Public versus Private

Previous research indicated that the Irish Independent conducted coverage of the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland through a “men of violence” frame (Kelly 1986) that focussed on paramilitary activity and ignored the relevance of causal factors. In a similar manner the Irish Independent coverage of the financial crisis is condensed into a manufactured frame that seeks to focus attention on purported differences between public and private sector workers. Iyengar (1991) argues that the media, through episodic news framing, deflects accountability and attention when news is routinely reported in the form of specific events or particular cases. In the aftermath of the collapse in Irish government revenue

due to falling tax revenues, the majority of media representation concurred with the government policy on the need for cuts in government public expenditure. However in the Irish Independent, priority is given to the area of cutting wage rates in the public sector. In essence the Irish Independent representation of the government's financial difficulties involve placing the emphasis on public sector pay. As Iyengar (2005, p.5) indicates this is a common feature of "emphasis framing" which involves highlighting a particular subset of potentially relevant considerations. In the construction of the 'Public versus Private' frame, cuts in public sector pay are portrayed as an economic necessity that equalises the suffering of (supposed) pay cuts and definite job losses in the private sector. In all, fifty four per cent of all articles make reference to, in many cases, hypothetical (as some positions in the public sector do not have an equivalent in the private sector, as an example policemen) differences between public and private sector workers. The articles compare and contrast, (on debatable and often fact-less evidence) pay, pensions and terms and conditions of employment between public and private sector workers. Overall there is the use of sensationalist headlines and evidence lacking comments to induce a "Public versus Private" scenario.

"Public sector pay is 50pc above private sector" (Irish Independent 11 July 2009),

"The private sector has already had a reality check, it's time for the public sector to step up" (Irish Independent 5 October 2009),

"Sick leave in public service is twice the rate of private sector" (Irish Independent 23 October 2009).

The above quotes are typical of headlines and in text comments that seek to construct what public sector worker representatives viewed as “the continuing part of the agenda to soften up public sector workers for further pay cuts and pit public sector workers against private sector workers” (Shanahan cited in Irish Independent 24 October 2009).

The ‘Public versus Private’ frame sets the tone of the debate and of the four further frames three portray public sector workers negatively. The final frame acts to cement the process by highlighting the contrasting positive nature of the private sector worker and also sees the media assume responsibility for and speak on behalf of the unemployed.

Frame 2: The Inefficient Overpaid Privileged Public Sector Worker

The need for public sector reform is highlighted in 33 articles and criticism of the attitude and work practices of public sector workers is highly visible in editorials and ‘expert opinion’ articles. The frame design consistently portrayed public sector workers as “work shy”, overpaid in comparison to workers in the private sector and constructed the concept of permanent pensionable employment as a “privilege”. Continuous references are used to link public sector workers and “inefficiencies”, “*closeted protected public sector workers*” who enjoy “*cherished public sector pensions*”. Workers who protect, “*expensive, inefficient patterns of overtime, allowances, shifts, strict demarcation of duties and resistance to change without payment -- sometimes even after payment*” (Irish Independent 2 December 2009). Workers that are, “*employed in the Irish public service who are higher paid and enjoy better conditions, pensions, privileges and job security than those who work in the private sector*” (Irish Independent 7 November 2009). Essentially “*our public*

sector's motto is really less work, more pay" (Irish Independent 21 September 2009)

Frame 3: The Militant Public Sector Worker

Representations also portrayed public sector workers as militant, uncaring, unreasonable, and disruptive to the general public, characteristics that seem unlikely from workers such as nurses, ambulance drivers, policemen, firemen and doctors. Workers attempts to protect their employment status, pay rates and pensions are represented as militants whose *"privileges must be protected by industrial muscle at home threatening grievous bodily harm to the country's reputation abroad"* (Irish Independent 7 November 2009). Militants who are ready for battle, *"IMPACT will use 'fighting fund' to pay workers"* (Irish Independent 23 October 2009). Workers that are disruptive, uncaring and endangering the public, *"Hospitals face strike chaos over pay rise demands"* (Irish Independent 30 September 2009). According to this coverage public service workers are intent on inconveniencing everybody *"Unions warn of 'painful and widespread' action"* (Irish Independent 17 July 2009). In contrast the government that threaten to cut workers pay and even sack thousands of workers are represented as the bravado saviours of the country, *"Cowen to hold firm as unions threaten strikes"* (Irish Independent 11 December 2009). Indeed the media representation exhorts the government to militancy, ridiculing the leader of the country for not engaging the unions, *"Cowen needs to show he runs country, not unions"* (Irish Independent 4 December 2009), *"Brian Cowen has no bottle for the battle"* (Irish Independent 2 December 2009). But congratulating the same government for complying with the preferred options of some *"And public servants will share the pain in the new year thanks to cuts of between 5 and 15pc in their pay announced in this month's Budget"* (Irish Independent 23 December 2009).

The contrast in representation is remarkable, militancy on the part of workers is abhorrent, yet militancy on the part of government and indeed the provocation on the part of the media to militant government action is, to re-arrange the argument of Atton (2000), *inside* the bounds of logic and common sense. However the findings here concur with the view of the GUMG, which demonstrated media bias against and hostility towards the aims of unions (1976, 1980, 1982, 1993; Beharrell et al. 1977; Hollingsworth 1986; Jones et al., 1985). There is also similarity with the previous findings of Clohessy “that the media in Ireland, tend to portray the actions of workers and trade unions as having less legitimacy than those of employers and government” (Clohessy 1981, p.11). However it would appear that in the minds of the editorial staff of the Irish Independent “militancy” is the preserve of the worker, indeed to paraphrase Clohessy, who ever heard of a ‘militant’ government or a ‘militant’ employer (1981, p.11).

Frame 4: Unpatriotic Non-Taxpaying Public Sector Worker

Representations of unpatriotic behaviour on the part of public sector workers, “*Unions must put country before their own interests*” (Irish Independent 16 November 2009), “*Public sector not carrying (its) share of (our) burden*” (Irish Independent 4 December 2009), suggest self-interest as opposed to the national interest, “*The threatened strike by public sector workers represents a triumph of self (and selfish)-interest over the ideal of service or the wider public interest*” (Irish Independent 16 November 2009). In addition public sector workers are denied recognition as taxpayers, “*Why should private-sector workers, in effect, pay (through their taxes) for public sector employees to stay at home*” (Irish Independent 27 October 2009), “*And the gap between the taxes raised from Irish citizens and the cost of public services is not closing*” (Irish Independent 10 September 2009). In fact the unpatriotic non taxpaying public sector is

costing us all, *“The private economy should not have to carry the costs of a public sector which earns a bigger differential than appears to be the case in other countries”* (Irish Independent 11 July 2009).

The representation of workers as unpatriotic and anti-general public is not uncommon. O'Neill (2007) showed how strike action by firemen in Great Britain was branded as unpatriotic at a time of national crisis (Gulf War) which imperilled the public (2007, p.825). Similarly Tracy (2004) identified the “public as victim” frame which highlighted the effects of industrial action by journalists on the public, while ignoring the workers plight (2004, p.462). Reinforcing the isolation of public sector workers is the perception created by the constant reference to the “taxpayer” that appears to confine the role of “taxpayer” to workers in the private sector only. This despite the fact that over 350,000 workers in the public sector in Ireland make up one sixth of the entire income tax-paying workforce

Frame 5: The ‘Private Sector is Victim’ Frame

34 articles highlight the plight of the private sector worker, with a particular emphasis on contrasting the “suffering” of the private sector in comparison to the “privilege” of the public sector. Indeed the private sector was portrayed as taking all the pain, *“Some say that the private sector has taken all the pain of the ongoing economic crisis, with figures of 30pc to 40pc pay cuts quoted, and massive layoffs”* (Irish Independent 4 December 2009). Because the private sector lived in the ‘real world’ *“The deal will further exacerbate the yawning gap between the treatment of the public and private sectors. In the private sector, a pay cut does not come with the sweetener of time off in lieu of the wages being given up, or the protection of pensionable pay or a guarantee of retaining your job”* (Irish Independent 2 December 2009), therefore the ‘real world’ generates understandable anger, *“There is growing concern about the*

level of anger in the private sector over what many seem to see as irresponsibility from cosseted, protected public sector workers. There is much talk of street riots” (Irish Independent 2 December 2009). In essence the representations are of a private sector that has endured unbelievable hardship, *“Private sector workers can't avert the Wrath of God. They have to take the hit by accepting a pay cut or losing their jobs”* (Irish Independent 9 October 2009). Similar to the “public is victim” frame (Tracy 2004) the private sector is represented as the victim, suffering the burden of economic hardship. However doubts are now been expressed about the authenticity of the claims of “the suffering private sector” particularly in relation to the claims of “huge pay cuts”. Evidence is now indicating that pay cuts (if any) were confined to those in lower paid employment, particularly in the construction sector and that wage reductions were non-existent in the upper echelons of the private sector and among professionals. The chairman of the Higher Public Servants Remuneration Committee Tony O’Brien said the committee’s examination indicated that the cuts in private sector pay had been overstated in the media. *“The cuts weren’t anything like the folklore would suggest, while in the public service they were very significant”* (Irish Times 6 August 2010).

Conclusions

The research argues that evidence of “framing” of public sector workers is manifest in the newspaper coverage of the Irish Independent. It further argues that this representation is symbiotic and reflective of the dominant discourse of government, business and employer elites because as Van Dijk argues news media generally do not act as major opponents of political or corporate policies and interests not because of their powerlessness, “but because of the fundamental similarities of their ideological positions” (Van Dijk 1996, p.29). In general this research suggests that the print media coverage of the Irish

Independent is reflective of the editorial ethos at the INMG which is aimed at system maintaining rather than system challenging.

The research findings raise issues as to how the media, in general, report and analyse the news. In essence one has to ask why the media had not been as diligent in analysing the origins and processes of vast profit accumulation during the boom years. The evidence suggests the media were more amicable to the vested interests of property and finance. There is no doubt that there were people sounding alarm bells concerning the neo-liberal orientation of Irish economic policy during the 1990s (Meade 2005, Kirby 2002, O Hearn 2003, Allen 2003), but it seems the media either disagreed or perhaps ‘looked the other way’. As an example, the concerns raised by a television programme aired on RTE in 2006 entitled *Future Shock-Property Crash*, were rejected by the printed news media. In fact the ‘expert’ journalists at the Irish Independent branded the programme an exercise in generating fear in the market (Ruddock 2007), others even sought to calm nerves by stating that “*if (and that is a big 'if') the market is going to crash it will do so in a patchy, selective way which will not impact to any great degree on many of the existing homes in Ireland*” (O' Donoghue 2007). The Irish Times (2007) property supplement simply dismissed the claims of impending doom in the property market as “*lurid predictions*”.

In seeking to explain the issues raised by this research, the use of a theoretical framework the “propaganda model” suggests that the primary function of the media representation of the INMG is to cement the status of free market economics and in so doing confirm the status of an elite group of people at the top of our society. Counter-arguments to this research may contend that due to its status as the leading daily newspaper, the editorial ethos of the Irish Independent is reflective of many in society. However one may consider that

Marx and Engels when facing the same predicament argued that, by using any means at their disposal the dominant class fortified its social power by representing its interests as the common interest of all the members of society (Tracy 2004, p.455). Similarly the issue of audience autonomy can argue that ultimately one can not take for granted that the public accept as gospel everything they read in the newspapers. However there is merit to the argument also that while audiences can pick and choose among media offerings, it is only within the limits of what the media will offer, and consequently audiences may be virtually forced to deal with messages they don't want and even reject suggesting that audiences are not sovereign even if they have a (constrained) freedom of choice (Chomsky and Herman 2009, p.21).

Disturbingly, on a macro level, this research raises serious issues that impact on the equality of access to the public sphere, observed by many as a prerequisite to the operation of a functional democracy. Evidence from the research points to the collusion of powerful interests such as government, media and employers in a process of drip feeding future policy decisions in attempts to gauge public reaction, and also help reduce the ‘shock and awe’ effect when these unpopular and perhaps ideologically driven policies are implemented. The arguments of this research at the very least indicate the immediate requirement of further research to investigate the ideological motivation of the media in general in Ireland. At a micro level, the ‘successful’ campaign run by government, media and others to justify the need for public sector pay cuts is worrying. Perhaps there are other vulnerable sectors in society such as old age pensioners, people on minimum wage, public health service users and welfare recipients who are thinking are we next?

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